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A Guide to Training Parents as Behavior Modifiers

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A Guide to Training Parents as Behavior Modifiers

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ABSTRACT

A guide to training parents as behavior modifiers is presented. Providing the parents with a summary of behavior modification principles is suggested. Having the parents select behaviors and gather base rates prior to the interview is discussed. Specific interview topics and questions are presented. The statement of a precise behavioral objective is stressed, as is the rehearsal of the change strategy. Assessment is reviewed with reference to the behavioral change, the parents, and the change agent. Common mistakes leading to the failure of the change strategy are listed. Finally, termination and generalization of parent behaviors are discussed.

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A Guide to Training Parents as Behavior Modifiers

> The first thought that comes to [the parents'] minds is that children ought not to be paid for what they do; for the most part they are expected to perform with no external consequences at all. Whenever the parent feels like giving external consequences, he does so as an "expression of love". The child is expected to recognize that the positive consequences are coming out of the goodness of the heart of the parents. The child should acknowledge and appreciate this fact, and in turn, perform in exactly the ways the parents wish.
> This is a very poor contract system.
>
> - Stephen E. Beltz
> How to Make Johnny Want to Obey
> p. 162

As mental health services are becoming more accepted by the community, the demand on the change agent's time is becoming greater and greater. One reflection of this is the number of clients in a particular caseload. This increase is paralleled by the introduction of accountability procedures. This combination results in efficiency becoming an absolute necessity.

The objective of this paper is to provide a vehicle whereby the behavioral change agent may become maximally efficient in determining the problem behavior and implementing a change strategy. It suggests a number

of techniques and guides for both prior to and during the initial interview such that the behavioral change agent may be able to implement the change strategy during the first interview. Finally, it suggests procedures appropriate to later stages of therapy and termination.

Two points should be made clear at the outset: 1) this paper is designed for change agents employing behavior modification principles; its usefulness to those employing strategies derived from other schools of thought may be limited; and 2) it is designed as a starting point for empirical research in this area, to be revised and modified, retested and refined, in order that empirical findings in this area may begin to be gathered.

Preparing the Parent for the Interview

In modifying child behavior, the change agent may frequently need to work via the parents. In such situations, he may in effect need to train the parents as behavior modifiers (Patterson, 1972). While the change agent may have taken some time to acquire his training in behavior modification, he is rather more limited in this respect with parents.

Because most agencies are not able to schedule appointments immediately, it would be well to put the intervening time to good use. Within a behavior modification framework, this is not only possible but also advisable. Using this time to instruct parents as to basic principles and terminology and to gather base rates not only saves the change agent time, it also

alerts the parents to the fact that the agency is concerned and active.

While there are a number of excellent books, directed at both laymen and professionals, dealing with the modification of child behavior, the range of parents who would thoroughly pursue such a work may be limited. Because of this, a summary of the basic principles of behavior modification may be mailed to the parents prior to their first appointment. Because of a need for further research and in order not to provide a rationale or justification for punishing the child, it is suggested that such a summary omit aversive techniques. This can be done by clerical staff and should result in the saving of a considerable amount of interview time.

It is suggested that the change agent contact the parents approximately one week before the appointment. There are two objectives to be accomplished in this call: 1) to ensure that the parents have received and read the previously mailed summary, and 2) to instruct the parents to begin taking the base rate.

While it is possible to be extremely technical in regard to the base rate, a more simplified approach is suggested. The change agent should assist the parents in defining a particular class of behaviors (there may be only one or there may be several problem behaviors), and instruct them to record its incidence. The recommended format would include:

1) the time of occurrence
2) the antecedents - what occurred immediately prior to the behavior
3) the consequences - what occurred immediately after the behavior

With this information, the parents are prepared to come to the first interview.

The Interview Setting

During the interview, it is possible and desirable to observe and assess parent behavior and parent-child interactions (Blackham and Silberman, 1971). Accurate observations will assist the change agent in determining the type and schedule of reinforcement typifying family interaction. Three possible settings and their advantages and disadvantages as discussed by Blackham and Silberman are reviewed.

Perhaps the location yielding most typical behavior patterns is the family home setting. The sequence of activities, areas of conflict, various family-member roles, and reinforcement style are available to observation. However, this requires a great deal of the change agent's time; hence, it cannot be readily employed.

The use of a "pseudo-home" setting within the agency has many of the positive characteristics of actual home observations. By observing the parents and child in a play or activity room through a one-way window, the effect of the change agent's presence is reduced. Also, frequency data may be obtained for both behaviors and reinforcements. However, two drawbacks to this method may be noted: 1) the observations may not totally reflect what constitutes "typical behavior"; and 2) the agency may not have such facilities.

The third setting is the change agent's office. Obviously, this does not have all the merits of the two previously mentioned settings. Because of this and such practical factors as the economy of time, it is necessary to consider the formal interview in greater detail in order to make optimal use of it.

Defining Counseling Interactions and Responsibilities

Many people have not had experience with counselors or psychologists; those who have may have a view of the change process different from the behavioral change agent's. Thus, in order to minimize confusion, the change agent should state explicitly what the process will be. These suggested guidelines are abstracted from the Systematic Counseling Process developed at Michigan State University by H. Burks, J. Engelkes, R. Johnson, N. Stewart, and B. Winborn.

The first factor to be defined is that of roles. The change agent's role consists of providing assistance by listening to and observing the client(s), specifying the problem areas, and suggesting courses of action to be followed to alleviate the problem. The parents' roles are to describe problem areas, provide information, and to be responsible for carrying out the assigned tasks and procedures.

The change agent should stress that the process will focus on specific problems and concerns (usually one at a time) with the objective of bringing about overt behavioral changes. Further, he should stress that the process is essentially a learning situation in which the parents can develop more effective ways of coping with some of the problem situations that either currently or possibly in the future will confront them.

Finally, the change agent should point out the limits of the counseling process. This would include limits on such factors as type of problem involved, time constraints, etc. Some things to be mentioned in this context include the fact that participation is on a voluntary basis and that

the change agent is obligated to maintain the confidentiality of the information gathered in the interview.

The Interview Guide

A review of the information previously mailed to the parents may clarify their understanding of it and thus facilitate communication. Two questions the change agent may choose to pose at this point would be "Do you have any questions regarding the material?" and "Did any of the material seem particularly applicable to your situation?"

In order to arrive at an appropriate change strategy, it is necessary to generate a pool of relevant information. Unstructured interviews tend to produce a great deal of verbalization, a substantial quantity of which is irrelevant to the problem at hand. The following guide, taken primarily from Holland's (1970) article, is intended to provide a format for generating relevant data in a parsimonious manner.

The first three steps may have been accomplished by the telephone contact.

1. Have the parents state the general complaint.
2. Have the parents state this in terms of discrete behaviors, the frequency of which they wish to increase or decrease.
3. Have the parents select a single problem behavior on which to concentrate initially.
4. Have the parents specify in behavioral terms the present behavior which they desire to change.

5. Have the parents specify in behavioral terms the precise behavior which they desire. (See The Statement of the Objective.)
6. Discuss whether the terminal behavior can best be attained by shaping and/or modeling.
7. Have the parents generate a list of possible reinforcers.
8. Discuss what deprivations are possible and/or necessary.
9. Discuss the situations in which the desired behavior should and should not occur.
10. Have the parents determine a situation which maximizes the probability that some form or portion of the desired behavior will occur.
11. Discuss how they may increase desired behavior by immediately giving a positive reinforcer following the behavior.
12. Discuss how they may decrease undesired behavior by withholding reinforcers which follow it.
13. Discuss how they may decrease undesired behavior by allowing or forcing it to continue.
14. Discuss the reinforcement schedule.
15. Discuss how the parents may vary the reinforcers they give to the child.
16. Discuss the use of multiple strategies.
17. Have the parents verbally rehearse the entire program.

The Statement of the Objective

The process of formulating objectives is viewed as a "Specification, refinement, and description of the expected output performance" (Banathy, 1968). A meaningfully stated objective should have three characteristics (Mager, 1962). First, it should identify and describe sufficiently to preclude misinterpretation the behaviors considered appropriate to the desired outcomes. An objective should describe the expected output performance in observable and preferably measurable terms.

After specifying behaviors, objectives must be further delineated by specifying the conditions under which the behavior is expected to occur. Thus, to demonstrate achievement of the objective, the person would not be required to exhibit the behavior in all situations. The demands of interpersonal activities are complex; therefore, effective social functioning requires behavioral discrimination. A complete behavioral objective should specify to what degree the behavior is related to social conditions.

Behavioral objectives include a statement of criterion or minimum performance level for achievement. This evaluative function makes it readily apparent when the methods and the person have succeeded, failed, or need further development.

The emphasis on behavioral specification of objectives places greater demands on change agents for useful analysis of complicated objectives. Complex behavior is an aggregate of simpler components which must be acquired and integrated. Acquiring complex behaviors

and modifying existing response patterns is achieved through a gradual process of an orderly learning sequence of more intricate or demanding performance; progress is influenced by defining intermediate objectives, which should be contained in the comprehensive statement of objectives. Sequencing intermediate objectives facilitate attaining the more comprehensive objective in several ways. Because no intermediate objective would require behaviors not already in the behavioral repertoire, the degree of positive reinforcement is maintained at a high level by continuous success and the unnecessary experiences of failure, which may jeopardize the change program, can be reduced to a minimum (Bandura, 1969).

Development and Implementation of the Change Strategy

Questions six through sixteen directly facilitate the development of the change strategy. The synthesis of these component parts with the parents should clarify procedures. The change agent should guide the parents in developing an appropriate change strategy.

A verbal rehearsal of the entire program is a necessity. This will assure the change agent of the parents' grasp of the strategy. An even more highly recommended but more cumbersome practice is for the change agent to model the process and gradually involve the parents; this is somewhat limited by: a) time constraints and b) situation-specific behaviors of the child.

Assessment

Assessment is a process, not a phenomena that occurs at the conclusion of the change process. Having an adequate and accurate baseline

and clear objective, which was discussed previously, with which to compare current behavior rates facilitates accurate assessment of the change process.

The parents should monitor and record the frequency of the behavior throughout the change process. Frequency charts and graphs provide not only the child with feedback but also the parents and the change agent. With such data, the change agent is able to assess several crucial factors:

1) the efficacy of the procedure; this also indicates when a different procedure should be instituted.
2) the efficacy of the reinforcer(s); this also indicates when to change reinforcers.
3) the reinforcement schedule; this indicates when to begin intermittent reinforcement and the size of interval or ratio to employ.

Thus, continual assessment indicates when termination may occur, rather than the time of termination indicating the need for a "one-shot" assessment. Also, the feedback provided to parents should not be underrated.

Other Behaviors

Earlier in this paper it was recommended that one behavior be chosen for modification. As it is brought under control, other problem behaviors may be attacked. These also should be considered singularly or at most in logical units, and separate strategies employed for each.

There are many reasons for doing this. It provides the parents with a more concrete behavioral orientation. Also, it demonstrates

change most rapidly, a factor important to parents. From a more theoretical approach, bringing one behavior under control may facilitate the modification of other (especially similar) behaviors. From the change agent's point of view there are two important factors here: 1) the modification of one behavior may cause the parents to see other behaviors from a different perspective, and therefore, may effect the behaviors they wish to modify; and 2) as the parents become more facile in applying the principles, the change agent can lessen his involvement with them, yielding a more efficient use of his time.

Termination

Beltz (1971) summarizes some of the mistakes he has observed in behavior modification paradigms. They are presented here primarily to serve as a "double check" on the preceding material. Such mistakes are common in working with clients other than children also, and will almost guarantee the failure of the change program. A brief list includes:

1) Giving up too soon.
2) Asking too much.
3) Reverting to old methods.
4) Choosing the wrong incentives.
5) Going too fast.
6) Giving unclear instructions.
7) Orders (threats or promises) you cannot back up.
8) Inconsistency.
9) The negative form of a positive contract.

The behavioral change agent's responsibility is twofold: first, not to make such mistakes himself, and second, to help parents to learn not to make them either.

It is the change agent's responsibility to institute termination. A primary factor here also speaks to the issue of resistance to termination: the change agent should stress that the parents have mastered a set of principles that they can now employ without contact with a professional and that these techniques and skills should prove to be of benefit in dealing with future problems (if not preventing them from arising).

The change agent should have taught the parents to define the problem behavior, to consider the alternatives, to develop objectives, to generate a variety of change strategies, and to assess their effectiveness. Hopefully, the parents will not need to see the change agent again.

After terminating contact with the parents, the change agent has two responsibilities. The first is follow-up, to test for persistence of effects. The second, and perhaps most important, is for the change agent to evaluate his own performance such that it will improve with subsequent clients.

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